

Speaking out for communists

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After the Communists' remarkably good performance in the March 1998 parliamentary elections, when they received almost 25% of the votes, notwithstanding the fact that they were practically not allowed on television and had to limit their advertising due to the scarcity of funds, we are facing a serious possibility that they may gain access to a position that may not be ignored.

On May 11, 1998, Ukrainian Communist leaders gathered for an extraordinary plenary meeting that nominated, almost unanimously, party leader Petro Symonenko as a candidate for the position of chairman of the Verkhovna Rada. Many observers described the decision as a little political sensation: although several Communists had been named as possible candidates for the position, the general assumption was that Communists would back Speaker of the previous parliament, leader of Socialists Oleksandr Moroz. However, either out of their own ambitions or due to some outside inspiration, Communists decided they had no need to support another party's leader, especially taking into account the fact that their faction is four times as numerous as that of Socialists and Peasants. Moreover, the plenary meeting announced that Symonenko will be the Communists' candidate at the 1999 presidential elections; therefore, the party needs a significant position that may guarantee constant exposure and a forum for promoting their cause.

The plenary meeting ensured that the Communist faction - so far the most disciplined in terms of voting and attending the parliamentary sessions - maintain that strict discipline in the parliamentary activity. All Communist MPs signed the text of an "oath of allegiance" to the party, providing that if for some reason a Communist MP fails to stand for the party's interests in the parliament, he or she will have to give up the parliamentary seat for the next one on the party's election list.

A Bit of History

Ukrainian left-wingers have much in common. They are strong advocates of giving official status to the Russian language, but never supporters of wide usage of any other language; they stand for the "union of Slavic peoples", meaning Russians and Belarusians, but never Poles, Czechs or Slovaks. They are anti-Catholic and anti-Islamic, but claim to support the (Russian) Orthodox Church. They are rather anti-Semitic and racist, anti-Western and particularly anti-NATO. They believe that workers and peasants will be robbed by "capitalists" and the IMF. They claim to know the panacea for Ukraine's problems, but deny that their real goal is regaining the power they lost in 1991.

The Communist party of Ukraine was banned for its part in the August 1991 coup d'etat, on August 30, 1991, by the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Ukraine. On the first day of the coup, the Central Committee of the CPU received an order from the Secretariat of the CPSU Central Committee, demanding on Ukrainian Communists to ensure due support of the putschists. Responding to the order, the Central Committee of the CPU sent similar orders to regional and local Communist authorities, urging them to instruct heads of enterprises, institutions, collective farms to "ensure discipline" and prevent "extremist sentiments and any illegal actions that may cause chaos, civil disobedience, and ... bloodshed". "Any demonstrations, rallies, manifestations, strikes are impossible", warned the top Communist authority. Maintaining the Soviet Union intact was defined as the key task of the party and Soviet bodies; in order to fulfil that task, local Soviet bodies were instructed to apply "individual provisions" of the emergency law. Later on, then first secretary of the CPU Central Committee Stanislav Hurenko argued that the next day the order had been annulled. On August 26, 1991, the last Soviet era plenary meeting of the CPU condemned the coup d'etat and attempted to separate from the CPSU by stating that the Communist party of Ukraine functioned "in accordance with the Constitution and laws of Ukraine". Later on, when the CPU was banned, its plenary meeting denounced the ban as "unmotivated and unconstitutional", and as "the beginning of attack on democratic freedoms and human rights".

After the CPU was banned, most of its former members dropped their Communist ideas, some joined the Socialist party of Ukraine, while more radical Communists united in a Union of Communists of Ukraine. In mid-1992, the deterioration of Ukraine's economic condition and growing crisis added to

nostalgia of many Ukrainians, that resulted in efforts to re- create the Communist party. In March 1993, the all-Ukrainian conference of Communists demanded on the Verkhovna Rada to cancel the ban on the CPU, to denounce the 1991 Bela Vezha agreements and restore the USSR. However, many of former Communist apparatchiks cared more about creating a force capable of bringing them back to power, and radical leaders of the Union of Communists of Ukraine were gradually forced out of the party's leadership. After the ban on CPU was abolished by the Presidium of the Verkhovna Rada in May 1993, the I (XXIX) congress of the CPU took place in Donetsk in June 1993, and Petro Symonenko was elected first secretary of the CPU Central Committee. Then he claimed that 30% of Ukraine's population supported the CPU. The 120,000-strong Communist party was reregistered in October 1993. According to Symonenko, by October 1997 the party ranks united 140,000 members.

The history of the renewed Communist party features internal cooperation and rivalry with the Communist party of Crimea. The Union of Communists of Crimea, led by an advocate of Crimean independence Leonid Grach, was formally registered in August 1992, and became the first and for some time the only legal Communist organization in the CIS after the CPSU was banned. Later on, as the Communist Party of the Crimea (CPC), it received official status in Ukraine two months earlier than the CPU. Unlike other regional organizations of the CPU, the CPC is a collective member of the CPU, which operates practically independently in the Crimea. Currently the CPC controls a number of youth, women's, veterans' and workers' organizations, and its leader, secretary of the CPU Central Committee Leonid Grach is seen as a possible strong competitor to Symonenko for the national leadership of the Communists. His positions as a national Communist leader may be enhanced by his recent election as Speaker of the Crimean Supreme Council. Apart from other factor, this may be a strong stimulus for Symonenko to seek the position of Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada.

The "Little Sensation"

The nomination of Petro Symonenko as a candidate for the position of the Speaker has manifested the long-discussed instability and failing unity on the parliament's left wing. Although it was assumed that the left forces would nominate and support a common candidate to occupy the Speaker's chair, Communists nominated their leader Petro Symonenko. While, in Moroz's view, Communists have the right to get their "own" speaker, as they have the most numerous faction, "not created artificially, but supported by voters", the decision appears to be unexpected and rather unpleasant for Oleksandr Moroz who could successfully use the Speaker's chair, powers and publicity to build up his possible presidential campaign. Nevertheless, he described the plenary meeting's resolution to nominate Symonenko as "logical". The decision to nominate Symonenko was reported to be a joint tactical move in left-wingers' strategy of gaining control over the parliament. If Symonenko fails, Communists may nominate Stanislav Hurenko, the last first secretary of the Soviet era CPU, almost forgotten by the post-Soviet policy-making community and brought back to politics by the recent elections. Meanwhile, many politicians and observers believe that Communists may be used for achieving Leonid Kuchma's tactical goal of preventing Oleksandr Moroz from occupying the Speaker's chair for the time left before the October 1999 presidential elections.

Currently Petro Symonenko is viewed as one of the most likely candidates for Speaker, though his election largely depends on whether he is wanted in that role by the executive authorities. According to member of the Central Committee of the Communist party of Ukraine G. Kriuchkov, Petro Symonenko will fail if he is supported only by left-wingers. Though, Kriuchkov says, repeating the rumor that has been circulating the parliament, in order to prevent the election of a strong, politically attractive Speaker, the President ordered the People's Democratic party to vote for Symonenko. According to some Communists, the executive branch may be planning a "Bulgarian option", by using Communists and than blaming political failures and economic collapse on them.

According to Oleksandr Moroz, Petro Symonenko is the most likely candidate to occupy the Speaker's seat, as he is the only nominee able to gather the needed 225 votes. However, simple calculations make the forecast sound less probable. By May 12, 1998 (the opening of the new parliament), the Communist faction numbered 125, the faction of the pro-presidential People's Democratic Party had 77 members, Rukh had 51, Hromada had 41, the bloc of Socialists and Peasants numbered 36. There are also 17 members of the Social Democratic faction and 19 members of the Green faction, and there may be 14 members of the Progressive Socialist faction, if the party's election results, contested at the court, are confirmed. There are also 41 independent MPs, some of whom may choose to one of the party factions. A Communist candidate may count on votes of Socialists and Peasants, but that will not be enough to

win the desired seat in front of the audience. Therefore, substantial additional support is needed. According to some observers, that support may, paradoxically, be offered by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and some independent MPs. In private discussions in the parliament's lobby, members of the PDP faction vigorously dismissed the hypothesis as "empty inventions".

What Symonenko's nomination may imply?

Before the parliament gathered for its first session, President Kuchma had meetings with leaders of political parties, including Symonenko and his other vehement critic, leader of Progressive Socialists Natalia Vitrenko. He also met leader of the Peasants' party Serhiy Dovhan after the party announced its intention to terminate the bloc with Socialists and create a faction of its own in the Rada. Only Oleksandr Moroz and Hromada leader, ex- prime minister Pavlo Lazarenko, currently sees as the main rivals to Leonid Kuchma at the October 1999 presidential elections, were excluded from that series of meetings.

The President's opponents seem to share the view that Leonid Kuchma tries to ensure the existence of the hard-line left opposition so that to support the claim he has used rather successfully for at least three past years and blame the "left" parliament for obstructing his pursuit of reforms.

Graduate in the parliamentary intrigue Leonid Kravchuk, suggested that "Symonenko himself would not want to be elected". "I don't think the resolution of the CPU plenary meeting will be supported by other factions. Moroz has the same chances, and if Communists and Socialists join forces [to back] one candidates, and another faction or two joins them, then, possibly, someone will be elected", said he.

According to Rukh activist Oleksandr Lavrynovych, the President's meetings with Vitrenko and Symonenko behind the closed door meant a search for common interests. After the meetings, and particularly after the nomination of Symonenko for the Speaker's position, some observers and journalists started trying to guess what those "common interests" of the President and his hard-line opponents might be, and whether the president might side with Communists so that to undermine Moroz's and Lazarenko's chances for a presidential victory.

Independent MP Yuri Karmazin also does not rule out a possibility of agreement between Communists and the PDP, and explains the Communists' eagerness to see their leader as Speaker of the parliament by "euphoria of easy victory and the lack of understanding of the current situation".

The executive branch has every reason to try to reduce Moroz's influence. According to Moroz, the faction of the Socialist and the Peasants' parties will initiate debates over the government's compliance with the law on raising minimum salaries and pensions. In the conditions when the government's debt to workers, employees, paid from the budget, and pensioners exceeds US\$ 3.3 billion, the adoption of a bill granting salary rises is disastrous for the government.

Instead of a Conclusion

Obviously, Moroz could make a far better Speaker than arrogant and lacking relevant experience Symonenko: first, Moroz has political authority and charismatic personality, second, he is known as an able parliamentary operator, and third, he is less likely to cause a strongly negative reaction of his political opponents. However, Oleksandr Moroz is too serious as a probable candidate for the presidency for his would-be competitors to ignore the possibilities provided by the Speaker's chair.

While it is likely that the Speaker will be a left-winger or left-centrist, this person will hardly make a decisive impact on the new parliament's ability to develop into a more adequate law- making body than the previous legislature. Events are likely to develop around four or five probable candidates for the presidency; thus, significant positive socioeconomic changes should not be expected until after October 1999.